

# Towards a Language for Artistic Realism

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## ABSTRACT

Realism has been a very vague and broad concept and term regarding videogames. While many related concepts are often subject of study, like representation, presence, historical accuracy, or immersion, there still is no language that can be used to talk about realism in a productive and precise manner. However, the term and concept have been discussed and analyzed in art theory and some language exists in that field. This paper reviews perspectives on realism in art theory and analyzes their applicability to videogames. The result is a concept of counterfeit realism, the quality of how well an artwork resists inquiry of its properties. The artwork can be said to be realistic to the degree to which the inquiry is unable to detect the artwork as a representation.

## Keywords

Realism, Representation, Art Theory, Philosophy

## INTRODUCTION

The simulation hypothesis was brought forward by Bostrom (2003) as a part of the simulation argument and says that human civilization and the world we know exist merely in a simulation. This relies on the notion that technologically advanced civilizations have such great computing power at their disposal that they can simulate an entire world and the minds of all the people living on it in supreme detail. This simulation would have to be of such a level of detail that it could resist the scientific inquiry conducted by its inhabitants without revealing its nature as a mere simulation. It would also have to be so detailed that its inhabitants displayed such a level of curiosity and capability to understand that they would conduct such inquiry in the first place.

Assuming for the sake of argument that such a simulation was possible, this points to a problem in the pursuit of realistic simulation: what is the difference between a perfect simulation of reality, and the real world? What is the difference between a perfectly realistic representation of a thing, and the thing itself? According to Diodato et al. (2012) such a perfect simulation would “*annul similarity in identity*” (p. 4) because it ceases to be just a representation. But the answer is not what matters most here, because what is of primary interest to this paper is the problem itself and its implications: what does it mean for a representation to be like the thing that it represents? On which basis are they compared?

Realism as a term is very vague since it can refer to many different concepts and has been used over time to refer to various art movements for different reasons and the same is true for philosophy. The term is no less difficult when talking about videogames. What does it mean for a videogame to have realistic graphics? Are simulation games more realistic than other videogames? Are games that aim for historical accuracy, or are set in a historical setting, an example for another kind of realism? But these questions are not new. Scholars have been studying paintings,

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literature, theatre, and other forms for a long time now and have wrestled with the concept of realism in various ways. It would seem that something could be learned about realism in video games by looking at how the concept was handled in other media.

This paper sets out to gain an understanding of realism in artistic representation by looking at specific understandings of realism from the domain of painting, as well as game studies and media studies to see how the new technological possibilities of computational media and the aesthetic arguments surrounding videogames have affected our understanding of artistic realism. It will attempt to find a language that enables more precise discussion about the topic. An artistic representation is understood here simply as an artifact that is made to be the likeness of another thing. This likeness can be visual but can also refer to any other property that the artwork imitates from the thing it represents e.g. sound, behavior, or material properties.

## **BACKGROUND**

While there is no singular theory or language of realism in videogames there is a body of research in both media studies and game studies about realism, representation, or related concepts. This section presents an overview of the most relevant texts and identifies where the research is still lacking.

These works can be loosely categorized in three groups. First, there are those that try to gain an understanding of realism.

Galloway (2004) makes a distinction between videogames that are realistic and videogames that are realist. The former are games that have high fidelity in their visual representation, and the latter portray ordinary subject matter and social situations. Galloway argues that the degree to which a game is realist depends on the player and their personal background, since the perception of social realism for the player depends on if they can relate to and understand that situation. Galloway advocates that games should focus more on achieving social realism, rather than lifelike graphical fidelity and argues that games are capable of a new kind of realism unavailable to literature, pictures, and movies: *realism in action*.

Tavinor (2019) analyses realism as it pertains to virtual media and groups understandings of realism in five distinct categories: realism and immersion, psychological realism, depictive realism, ontological realism, and functional realism. While this analysis is often informed by art theory, the core of the arguments is based on media studies.

Second, there are those that study the effects of different degrees or kinds of realism and use a working definition of the word.

Wages et al. (2004) perform an analysis of different effects regarding the perceived realism of a representation and the stimuli that it causes in the player, pointing out that less realistic representations can evoke greater stimuli. They then advocate for deliberate non-realism in videogames. They see realism in the way it is generally used when talking about videogames as a comparison of the game to a particular thing. They give the examples that the graphics of a videogame are compared to our sense-impressions in the real world, and that the appearance of an element from the modern day real world in a fantasy setting would be unrealistic for that setting. Furthermore, they elaborate that different properties of a game can be compared to different reference points independent of each other. This understanding however does not specify how the individual properties of the videogame are compared to the particular reference point.

Lombard and Ditton (1997) introduce the notion of presence as the *illusion of non-mediation*, i.e. a state in which the user of a medium does not perceive their experience as mediated. This is among other things informed by the notion of immersion, which is itself a concept that could be seen as related to realism, as well as a distinction between two kinds of realism: perceptive realism meaning the medium provides believable sensory input, and social realism meaning the plausibility and the lifelikeness of the events that are mediated.

Cheng and Cairns (2005) empirically studied the impact of changes in graphical and behavioural realism on the player's immersion. Graphical realism here followed the common definition of visual fidelity. Behavioural realism was defined as "*how closely objects and characters act in comparison to the same object in the real world (for example, how high a person can jump).*" They found that once immersion was established changes in these kinds of realism did not disturb that immersion.

Masuch and Röber (2005) analyze the graphics of videogames and argue that photorealism is not necessarily the best ideal to pursue for every videogame, and that videogames should explore different styles for different artistic visions.

Fullerton (2008) investigates documentary games and points out that they can be specific or general in the scenario they portray, more realistic or more abstract in their representational style. The most specific documentary games provide extreme examples for realism in historical accuracy since they closely depict a specific event rather than general cultural and political contexts.

Third, there are those that study subjects related to representation and realism.

Aarseth (2019) analyses how videogames transform real, historical, and fictional landscapes into the spaces that players actually traverse in the game and names this process *ludoforming*. Aarseth points out that "*Ludic landscapes consist of two layers that are conceptually superimposed, but independent: The topographical, which is the sign-stream presented by the game engine to the player, and the topological, which is the actual room-for-movement through which the player's tokens navigate*" (pp.130-131), and that artists in other arts have also made adaptations to their subject in its representation in their artwork. This is a representational act. The developers of a videogame design the ludic landscape to be in the likeness of that real, historical, or fictional landscape, but also make alterations so that the environment is more suitable for their game. These alterations can be of varying magnitude so the ludic landscape can be said to be a more faithful, i.e. more realistic, representation of the original inspiration the less alterations are made to it in the ludoforming process. Topography and topology can also be said to be representations of each other.

Payne (2012) investigates the relation between realism and marketing for war games and points out that those must be selective about what they advertise. The analysis is informed by Galloway's understanding of social realism and reveals how war games are advertised as realistic in their visceral feel, their weapons, or vehicles, but must at the same time conceal or downplay the harsh reality of being a soldier on the front lines, particularly when the game depicts contemporary wars.

Shaw (2015) analyses how the commitment of a game to historical accuracy prevents it from critiquing the politics of that historical period. If the game wants to depict particular historic events and tell a particular historic narrative, then the player cannot have the freedom to significantly alter the course of those events. This analysis is informed by Galloway's understanding of social realism and points out that the

limitation in the freedom of the player character forces a particular historical perspective on the player.

Shaw (2014) researches the representation of marginalized groups in videogames. This is relevant for discussions of realism because it is about how realistic games are at representing both their players and society at large and seems to fall under the category of social realism.

Krzywinska et al. (2012) and Ecenbarger (2016) research transmedial storytelling. This research is related to realism because transmediality is about representation: characters, places, and other elements are transferred from one medium to another and since different media have different ways of communicating these elements the adaptation can be more or less faithful to the original. It can be said to be more or less realistic.

This literature review has shown that the topic of realism spans over many different areas of research in the field of game studies. Some of these works have produced models of realism, which usually make distinctions between several kinds of realism. It has also shown that different understandings of realism can conflict in a videogame, e.g. the desire to portray historically accurate events can conflict with the desire to represent the diversity of the players if the historical setting seems to prohibit the latter. The body of research presented here shows a lack of an overarching concept of realism that would allow the discussion to incorporate all the different facets of the topic. At the same time, the diversity of the research also shows how useful such a concept would be for the field, by allowing for clearer communication and easier comparison of related works. Such a concept would be more of a langue than a model of realism. This is a naturally very ambitious aim, and not one that this paper can hope to fully accomplish.

## **METHOD**

First this paper provides a brief overview of different ways realism has been conceptualized in the artistic domain of painting. After that, the applicability of the selected theories to the medium of videogames will be analyzed with regards to representation through simulation. Lastly, this paper will investigate a selected videogame through the lens of the previously presented concepts of realism, followed by a discussion of the results. The broad scope of the concept of realism makes it difficult to select the videogames based on formal characteristic. Instead, the paper will analyze one particular game that has strong relations to realism in its core concept.

## **REALISM AND REPRESENTATION**

There are different schools of thought about realism in the field of art theory and this paper cannot hope to exhaustively cover all of them. Instead of attempting just that, this paper will present only two texts that are particularly applicable for the discussion at hand. The first is Dominic Lopes' work *The Special and General Theory of Realism: Reply to Abell, Armstrong, and McMahon*, in which Lopes undertakes a similar project as this paper: he takes account of various specific understandings of realism in order to produce from them a more concise and general understanding of the concept. In doing so, Lopes also provides a set of different kinds of realism, some of which seem to be exclusive to painting, but others seem to be applicable to videogames as well. The other text is John Hyman's work *Realism and Relativism in the Theory of Art*. Hyman proposes a framework for realism that distinguishes between different kinds of realism, one of which is of particular interest here because it translates very directly to videogames since it puts the observer of a painting in an active position when it comes to evaluating its realism, a role that can be seen as analogues to the player of a videogame.

Lopes (2006) makes an effort to categorize and group the different understandings of realism that exist for paintings by first taking account of the understandings that judge the property of realism in a particular way. These are called special realisms and contain for example *True Realism*, how well a painting serves as a source for true information, and *Stylistic Realism*, an understanding of realism not as a property of the painting but rather as a property of the style in which it is painted. Based on these special realisms a set of five kinds of general realism is then developed. These are not specific considerations that can be applied directly to a particular painting but are the underlying concepts that are addressed by a particular specific realism. The first general realism, for example, is the idea that “*depiction is a distinct kind of representation.*” The specific realism of *One Realism* would fall under this general realism, since it is the perspective that all paintings are realistic and that this makes them different from other forms of representation.

These are the specific realisms that are at this point deemed relevant for the research at hand:

- Lifelike Realism refers to the degree to which the depiction evokes the qualities of the real object that it depicts. There is no definitive list of what these qualities are, but in general the depiction must have the look and feel of the real object. An apple that is painted as being liquid would not fit this category, but a boulder that looks heavy would. The aspect of pictorial accuracy that is included in this kind of realism is reminiscent of the level of graphical fidelity in videogames. The realism of a game’s physics simulation would also fall in this category.
- Uncanny Realism arises from dissonance in Lifelike Realism: when the depicted objects are lifelike in some ways, and not in others. The effect is stronger the greater the difference in lifelikeness is. This seems to be an inversion of the concept of game feel. (Swink, 2008) When the objects in a videogame behave as the player expects them to according to their material presentation then that enhances the physicality of the world, as well as the players experience. Dissonance, e.g. a heavy boulder phasing through a solid wall without collision, reduces it.
- Illusionistic Realism applies to paintings that hide their nature of being pigment on a canvas. According to Lopes such a painting “*can be viewed in conditions where it is indistinguishable from the scene it depicts.*” It blends in with its environment. On first inspection this calls the concepts of presence and immersion to mind since these are all in some way about blurring the line between the mediated experience and the real world.
- True Realism, as mentioned above, is about paintings that contain true information about the scene that they are depicting. A lifelike portrait of a person for instance contains the information of how that person looks. This echoes the issue of historical accuracy in videogames.
- Revelatory Realism conveys information about things that cannot normally be seen with the naked eye. Lopes gives the examples “*of tiny, gigantic, and inaccessible objects, and also pictures that depict scenes as having combinations of properties they could not be seen to have.*” Interestingly, this kind of realism requires the artwork distort representation. The object must be shown much larger or smaller, or from an otherwise impossible perspective to enable the revelation. This applies also to the style of presentation of videogames.
- Stylistic Realism is the perspective that the specific realisms above do not only apply to individual paintings but can also be applied to styles of painting. This

may be seen as a parallel to genres in videogames. While the genre categorizations that are persistent to this day as industry standards have their critics (Apperley, 2006) the general idea of grouping artworks based on stylistic elements leads to an interesting question in regards to the research at hand: Are some genres of videogames more realistic than others because of their stylistic conventions and goals?

- Relative Realism argues that whether a painting is perceived as realistic is relative to the observer and the context in which it is seen. Previous knowledge or cultural background can influence how the viewer sees a painting, what they recognize as true, or whether they can see the illusion or not, among other things. Here the observer is made the judge of the realism of the artwork. If they believe that it is realistic, then it is so. The artwork becomes a representation of the observer's beliefs.

Since these understandings of realism all transfer to the kinds of realism this paper has seen in the review of the discussion in game studies, producing a language for realism that incorporates them will also transfer to the discussion of videogames. The benefit of taking this detour through art theory instead of discussing only inside game studies is, that the categorizations provided by Lopes, based on a wide background of aesthetic philosophy, offer more clearly defined concepts for realism that are more amenable for analysis.

Hyman (2005) makes a distinction between realism and subject matter and realism in technique. Realism in subject matter refers to artworks that depict scenes taken from ordinary life, rather than fantastic or heroic tales, and do not idealize that subject matter. Logically this means including the ugly and imperfect realities of life. *"Realism, in this sense, is about the choice of subject-matter and the manner in which it is treated."* (p. 38) Realism in technique consists of three different aspects. *Accuracy*, the first of these aspects, comes itself in three types: *"narrative accuracy, which is the accurate representation of a story or an episode within a story; iconic accuracy, which is the accurate representation of a particular individual or place; and pictorial accuracy, which is the accurate depiction of a kind of material or object or activity—such as water or satin, a palm tree or a dove, sleeping, galloping or making love."* (pp. 40-41) This mostly seems to fall under Truth Realism, since it is about the artwork containing true information about the narrative, person, or place it depicts. Pictorial accuracy on the other hand is more reminiscent of Lifelike Realism. The second aspect is animation. It refers to the characteristics that make the painting appear lifelike: showing emotion, character, and movement, among other things. The word is used deliberately here since this strongly resembles Lopes category of Lifelike Realism as objects being depicted with properties that they would have in the real world. The third aspect in realism in technique is modality. Hyman uses the word to refer to *"the extent of the range of questions it is possible to ask about a depicted scene"* (p. 44) and considers this the *"principal measure"* (p.44) for realism in technique. This means that the more details in information a depiction contains, the more realistic it is according to this understanding. This includes details in the clothing, in body shape, emotional expressions, as well as social relations. It also entails a degree of deliberation on the side of the painter. We can ask the question "Is the person depicted in this painting happy?" only if the painter made an effort to include stylistic elements, like facial expression or posture, that convey that particular information. It also requires the painting to actually depict a person. The same question could not be asked about a still life of a flower, although other questions might be asked about the flower that would not apply to the painting of a person. In this sense of modality, these two hypothetical paintings would be realistic in different ways.

## VIDEOGAMES AND SIMULATION

Now that a basic overview of realism in art theory is established there is one more issue that needs to be addressed, namely the relation between representation and simulation. The two words have been used interchangeably in the introduction, but now that it comes to applying them in analysis they should be more clearly defined.

Frasca (2004) formulates a definition of simulation as “*to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system.*” The notion of simulations as being about behavior and receiving input, providing different reactions to different inputs, and providing an output is then presented based on this definition. Frasca then opposed this idea of simulations as behavior-based systems to the notion of representation as a fixed stream of signals. This supposedly sets videogames apart from traditional arts and media: the player provides the game with input in some form and the game reacts dynamically, whereas representation, as for example with narrative or paintings, only provides the viewer with input.

This is where the particulars of the subject of realism become relevant for the aesthetic discourse of videogames. Seen through the lens of the art theory presented above realism can be understood as a property that exists not only in the artwork itself, but also in the dialogue between the artwork and the observer, or the player in this case. In terms of the realism in technique, as understood by Hyman, and the aspect of modality, as the questions that the player can ask the simulation, the question “how does this object in the simulation behave if I provide input X” is simply one that the player can ask the simulation or the videogame, but not the painting. Furthermore, this language can be applied to Frasca’s definition of simulation. The simulation is a system that models an original system, and it performs some of the behaviors of the original system. By necessity, the simulation must have some properties of the original system, those that are required to simulate its behavior. Since the player can question the simulation and its behavior through input, they can also question it about the properties that it shares with the original system.

Bogost (2008) criticizes the idea of a perfect, objective simulation, since a player necessarily brings themselves, their mental states and ideologies into the simulation by interacting with it. This blurs the line between the world of the simulation and the real world. Galloway (2004) introduces the *congruence requirement*, claiming that there can be no true realism without some sort of connection between the player’s social reality and the game. There must be some form of relatability for the game to be realistic to the player. The specific realisms given by Lopes fit this view on simulations, since they are inherently relativistic. The relatability between the player and the simulation is explicitly addressed by Relative Realism. This view that the world inside the simulation is not a separate world, but rather a place in the real world that is connected to the outside through the simulation and interaction with players does not affect the discussion in this paper much. A videogame that represents a “real world” city is, for the purposes of this paper, not much different from a physical model of a city that might be found in a museum, even though their different material properties allow for different kinds of interaction. Furthermore, there is a distinction to be made between the simulation feeling real to the player, and a part of the simulation accurately depicting an element of the world outside the simulation.

## ANALYSIS

The background of art theory regarding realism in paintings has been established. The argument has been made that this theory can also be applied to videogames because of their nature as simulations. Now that this paper has a lens through which it can view realism in videogames it can investigate individual games.

*Baba is You* (Hempuli, 2019) is a level-based puzzle game. The player completes each individual level by physically moving their avatar to a goal. They can push other objects by moving into them. The key point about *Baba is You* is that there are two kinds of rules in the game. The first set of rules are the static rules. They are always in effect and cannot be changed. This is the usual way rules in videogames work. The second set of rules are mutable. In every level there is a predefined set of text blocks. Whenever text blocks align horizontally or vertically and form a sentence, that sentence becomes a valid rule in the level. At the same time, the player can disable rules by breaking the alignment of the corresponding text blocks.

This makes the mutable rules of each level part of the play, as the player often has great freedom in rearranging the text blocks. At the same time the levels are so carefully designed that despite the power the player has over the rules, they are in the end restricted by the static rules, and by text blocks that are placed outside of their reach, and must think outside the box to solve the level. *Baba is You* materializes these mutable rules and makes them objects of play. In this regard it is deliberately anti-realist. It confronts the player with the fact that videogames do not need to be representations of the real world even in behavior: their rules can be completely arbitrary.

That this is a very deliberate choice and not a coincidence can be seen in how the game introduces new elements. Among many other things there are keys and doors in the game. But no objects other than text have any inherent rules attached to them. And there are text blocks for the properties OPEN and SHUT. When an object with the property OPEN and object with the property SHUT collide, they destroy each other. In the first level in which these are introduced (LAKE-6: LOCK) these properties are active for a key and a door respectively and the player progresses through the level by pushing the key onto the door. Later in this level, the player must change the configuration so that a different element can open the door. Here the player must be willing to abandon their conceptualizations of the behavior of the real world and accept the rules of the game, or else they cannot progress. They must separate the in game logical rule elements of OPEN and SHUT from the real-world functionality of keys and doors.

It should be pointed out that the rules of the game are perfectly logical and always internally consistent. They just do not represent the real world. The player can formulate many different combinations of rules with the text blocks that they have available in the game and experiment with them. The resulting rules often do not contribute to the solution of the individual level, but they are accounted for in the simulation, nonetheless. The behaviour of *Baba is You* is realistic in the sense that a lot of questions can be asked about its rules, exactly because it includes all those possibilities. The internal consistency of the rules points towards a clearly defined abstract concept, a source system in Frasca's terms, that the videogame implementation of *Baba is You* is simulating. The level of detail to which this concept is implemented makes the behaviour of the rules of the game a rather realistic representation of that concept.

So, *Baba is You* is at the same time anti-realist, in that it does not represent the real world, as well as realistic in its behavior. The difference between these two is only what they are considered to be a representation of. This points to a key characteristic of realism: it is a relational property. Artworks are not realistic in and of themselves, they are realistic in relation to something. This is entailed in this paper's premise of looking at realism in artistic representation. An artwork can only be considered an artistic representation if there is an object that it is a representation of. The more interesting part is what Wages et al. (2004) already noted in their understanding of realism: it does

not have to be measured in relation to the real world. An artwork can also be a realistic representation of fictional, historical, or completely abstract systems and concepts.

But the game is not just behavior. It also has many different aspects that could be compared to something else. The visual depiction of the game elements for example could be said to be a representation of reality. Since all the game elements are represented in the style of small doodles with a single color it could not be said to be a particularly realistic depiction of the visuals of the real world, but the comparison can still be made. This points to another key characteristic of realism: it is particular to specific properties. Wages et al. (2004) already included this as well in their working definition of realism. Social realism judges games as realistic with regards to subject matter. Lifelike realism and illusionist realism judge artworks as realistic based on the technique with which they are produced, although both use very different criteria to evaluate that technique. So, saying that *Baba is You* is not a realistic representation of the real world is not sufficient. It is an unrealistic representation of reality with regards to visual realism. The representation and the real thing can only be compared through a specific lens. The game might of course also be unrealistic compared to the real world in other ways than just visual realism, but those realisms would have to be evaluated separately. This is also where uncanny realism finds application since it arises from a dissonance in lifelike realism. If a videogame can be said to be realistic in one aspect, but not in another, it can create that dissonance. But there is a problem with the notion of lifelikeness when it comes to works of fiction in particular because they can represent concepts that are either abstract or not like the real world, even if they are internally consistent. As Wages et al. (2004) point out, an element that would be lifelike compared to the real world can be out of place in a fantastic setting. This is because it disrupts the internal consistency of the artwork and introduces dissonance. It seems from this that lifelikeness is primarily about believability, rather than likeness to reality.

If lifelikeness is about believability, then this also makes the application of relative realism a logical consequence. Relative realism is fundamentally about subjectivity and that whether an artwork is seen as realistic depends on the individual observer or player. Through this perspective realism is no longer just a property of the artwork itself, but rather an emergent quality that manifests when an observer examines the artwork. Hyman's definition of realism in technique as the extend of the range of questions that can be posed to the artwork applies directly to this. By examining the artwork, the observer poses questions to it. If the artwork has a reply to that question than it has defended its claim to realism against that particular observer. If it does not, then it has been identified as unrealistic by that observer. Since the observer plays such a central role in evaluating the believability of an artwork it also becomes important that different people have different knowledge, backgrounds, and interests. A biologist might notice flaws in the simulation of an ecosystem that a physicist might not notice, and a physicist could find inaccuracies in a physics simulation that a biologist could not find. These two hypothetical observers are examining the artwork through different lenses, and their different knowledge allows them to investigate it to different levels of detail through their respective lenses. This can be identified as the third key characteristic of realism: it is subjective

The comparison of properties through lenses reveals the fact that lenses can be arbitrarily broad or detailed. If two things can be compared based on visuals than they can also be compared only based on shape, or only based on color. But even these specific aspects can become more detailed. An observer could look at the overall color palette of an image, or at the frequency of changes in color in a particular object. They could look exclusively at brightness or only at hue. They can look at the image as a whole or zoom in on small parts. Earlier in this paper the question was raised if some genres of videogames are naturally more realistic than others, particularly the ones

colloquially referred to as simulation games. While videogames of course cannot be generalized that easily it seems that games that focus on a high degree of authenticity in a subject that they claim to simulate have potential for a high degree of realism in that specific subject.

This is where the simulation hypothesis that was presented in the introduction becomes relevant because it makes for a powerful thought experiment. This hypothesis is essentially about a perfect simulation of reality, the ultimate illusionist masterpiece. The people living in such a simulation could only uncover the nature of their world by examining it through different lenses until they find a lens through which the simulation does not resemble reality. They must find a flaw in the simulation. To apply Hyman's understanding of realism in technique more directly again: the lens asks a question to which the simulation has no answer. As established above, realism can be phrased as a dialogue between the artwork and the observer: an interrogation of its properties and its likeness to the thing it represents. This implies that the simulation is more realistic the better it can resist such inquiry without revealing its true nature. Or in other words: the more realistic an artistic representation is, the better it is as a counterfeit. So, the understanding of realism that this paper has developed could fittingly be called *counterfeit realism*. This is the fourth and final key characteristic of realism: it is responsive. When the observer asks a question, the artwork has an answer.

The simulation hypothesis raises one more issue. If the perfect simulation is one where an observer cannot tell that it is a simulation, then what is the difference between counterfeit realism and traditional illusionist realism? The answer lies in the difference between representation and mediation. The goal of illusionism is that the artwork is indistinguishable from its surroundings, the illusion of non-mediation, but it does not require the object it represents to be lifelike or believable in the real world. Counterfeit realism is the counterpart to that. It is defined by believability and lifelikeness, the illusion of nonrepresentation, but does not aim to hide its medium. An example for this difference can be seen in a photo of a real apple, and a plastic replica of an apple. The photo is clearly a mediation, but not a representation, disregarding image manipulation for the sake of argument since its motive is just that: a real apple. The plastic apple on the other hand is clearly not mediated. An observer could hold it in their hand. But it is a representation of an apple. The simulation hypothesis presents us with a simulation that achieves both the illusion of non-mediation as well as the illusion of non-representation. For the evaluation through the language of counterfeit realism mediation is disregarded. An ideal counterfeit is effectively indistinguishable from the thing that it represents in all properties. Taken to its extreme it could be considered a duplicate, and no longer just a counterfeit. This ideal could consequently be called *duplicate realism*.

## **DISCUSSION**

As stated in the introduction, and shown in the literature review, realism is a very broad term and concept. Art theory, which is significantly older than game studies, has not come up yet with a singular understanding of realism of that scale, so attempting such a concept for videogames is ambitious.

At first inspection counterfeit realism does what it was supposed to do: it is sufficiently descriptive to allow for precise communication and discussion, it encompasses all kinds of specific realism since they can be constructed as lenses, and it provides an explanation for how different degrees of realism are constructed through the resistance against inquiry. However, its dismissal of the illusion of non-mediation leaves room

for further research. The paper also only uses a small set of perspectives on the matter of realism from art theory. Further perspectives may bring different insights to light.

The process by which counterfeit realism was created is very limited in scope. The analysis only investigated one particular videogame. The Language should be tested on more games and artworks for verification. Because of this it also does not consider the particulars of other kinds of videogames. For example, the input method. Is there a difference in realism or mediation in motion controls as opposed to more traditional controllers? How does virtual reality interact with the language of counterfeit realism? Furthermore, this paper has so far not considered the criticisms that were brought against realism in art theory. Since this language is largely derived from art theory those criticisms may apply to it as well and should be considered.

The key motivation of this paper was to provide a preliminary encompassing language for realism. The texts that have been looked at in the literature review only ever managed to bring up new lenses. The working definition of realism used by Wages et al. (2004) contained some of the elements of counterfeit realism, although it was less extensive.

Counterfeit realism contributes to the understanding of realism primarily by providing a language that allows the incorporation of different lenses and granting a broader view on the subject. This enables clearer discussion of related research, even though it sacrifices depth and attention to some details in its pursuit of that broad overview.

## CONCLUSION

This paper generated an understanding of realism in videogames, based on art theory, that conceives of realism as a relational property consisting of three elements: the artistic representation, the real, historical, fictional, or abstract object that it is compared to, and the lens through which it is compared to it. The representation is realistic compared to the thing it represents under a particular lens to such a degree as it can resist inquiry through that lens without revealing its nature as a representation. This concept is named *Counterfeit Realism* and is defined by four key characteristics:

1. **Relational.** An artwork is never realistic on its own. It is always a realistic representation of something.
2. **Particular to individual properties.** An artwork is not realistic as a whole. Particular properties of the artwork are realistically like the corresponding property of the thing it represents. Different properties must be evaluated separately.
3. **Subjective.** Different people can disagree about if an artwork realistically represents a property of an object if their different background knowledge allows them to see flaws in the likeness that the other cannot see.
4. **Responsive.** An artwork's realism only manifests when its likeness to the object is questioned, and the artwork resists the investigation.

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